

[H. Perry Davis]

PERSONAL LIFE HISTORY NORTH CAROLINA

Subject: H. Perry Davis

Occupation: Justice of the Peace

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REAL NAMES CHANGED NAMES

H. Perry Davis David Perry

Bill Newbern Bill McGhee

Elizabeth City Pocomo City

Bruce Pasterfield Tony Bromfield

Squire Wilson Squire Bagley C9 - N.C. Box 1-

We'll make the introduction snappy for here is a highly articulate character who has a story to tell and tells it without restraint or apology. The author has a hunch that every reader of this personal life history of Justice of the Peace David Perry, of Pocomo City, will want to meet and know the real man when they finish his story. David Perry now speaking: —

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"I was born on a farm near Pocomo City, N. C. Only a swamp separated our farm from the town, and the rail road tracks that skirted the town were just across the swamp. I would lay awake nights and listen to the whistle of the locomotives, and the clanging of their bells — sweetest music I thought I had ever heard. Whether it was the passing trains with their bells and whistles and clatter on the rails that put the wander-lust into me, or whether it was just born in me, I can't say. All I know is that from the time I knew anything I wanted to go places and see things. I wanted to get on one of those trains and go as far as it would take me. I thought I'd like to be an engineer at the throttle of a locomotive, sending it thundering through the darkness and careening around curves. Or I would be a brakeman walking the tops of rolling freight cars with the wind flopping the legs of my trousers.

"I lived to realize my ambition. I railroaded from the time I was 16 until I was 28. I worked first 2 and last on the Central of Vermont, the Bangor & Maine, the N.Y. Central, the Northern Pacific, the Union Pacific and Santa Fe. I saw every state in the union but one. I started as a yard man, when I had to lie about my age to get a job. I worked up from brakeman to freight conductor, and when I walked off my last railroad job in 1919 I drew \$300 for my month's pay. I saw life in Chicago, St. Louis, Denver, San Francisco and Seattle. I lived for months on Frisco's famous Barbary Coast, met Jack London there.

"As a matter of fact I left home when I was 12 years old. It was this way: I was working in the field with my father and he got mad with me about something and started to lick me. I ran from him, jumped a fence, hit the road to town and got up with my chum Tony Bromfield, whose father had married one of my aunts, and told him I was going to stay with him. Tony's daddy had a blacksmith and wheelwright shop and I hired out to him. My father came to town to look for me next day and asked me if I didn't want to go back home? I told him no, I had hired out to Mr. Bromfield. The old man didn't make any fuss about it. I guess he thought I'd soon tire of pumping a bellows and come back home.

"I stayed with Mr. Bromfield for a year and then got a job as galley boy on a yacht. I didn't stick to that job very long. Maybe I wasn't cut out for a sailor. Came back home. I had a

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brother in New London, 3 Conn. When I was fourteen going on fifteen my brother took me up to New London where he was working on two big ocean freighter's being built for Jim Hill's Northern Pacific. I was a big, husky boy for my age, had a keen eye and a nimble way and my brother got me a job as a fitter's helper on one of those ships at 75 cents a day. I was quick to catch on and soon they raised me to a dollar a day, and then to a dollar and a half.

"When I was sixteen I went over to the Central Vermont R.R. and asked for a job. It was a second rate rail road, paid low wages and had to hire minors, liquor Dicks and men who couldn't hold jobs on first class road. From then on I was a railroad man.

"I have had some harrowing experiences and walked close to death many a time. It never occurred to me that it wasn't just my good luck that I wasn't killed a dozen times, until once when I came home for Christmas I happened to mention my luck to one of my sisters.

'Don't thank your luck,' said my sister; 'thank your mother's prayers; all of her prayers have been for you since you left home; she prays night and day, with hardly a prayer ever for any of the rest of us.' I thought I noticed a tone of resentment in my sister's voice.

"But sister was right; I know the power of prayer. My mother was never a showy kind of Christian; just a meek, soft-spoken woman who talked little about her religion, but who read her Bible when the rest of us were in bed and prayed constantly in secret.

"I married a fine woman in Utah. I led her a dog's life; not that I was mean to her, but just irresponsible. If ever a bird followed the scriptural injunction to give no thought to the morrow, that was me. My first wife died, leaving a daughter by me. My second wife was a widow and had a son by her first marriage. But I'll come to him later. Both of the kids have been loyal to me; they have put up with all my cussedness, frivolities and accentricitics and been damn good natured about it. They're fine kids, fine as they make 'em.

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"I married the second time. Met my second wife on a street corner in Oakland, Calif. There were tears in her eyes. I stepped up to her and said:

"Sister, can I help you?"

"I don't know,' she said, 'I'm lost.'

"You aint lost Sister,' I said, 'You're found — and I don't mean maybe.'

"I had traveled enough and rubbed elbows enough with life to know a genteel woman when I saw one. Turned out that the little woman was the sister of a governor in one of the Western States. I rushed her and we were married in no time. She came East with me in 1919 when I quit my job on the Santa Fe.

"Why did I quit? Well, I just couldn't stick to 5 any job that didn't interest me. This job bored me stiff, sitting for hours in the cupola of a caboose on long desert runs and nothing else much to do. The tail of my spine ached for six months after I left the job.

"Strange to say, I had saved up a little money when I came back East. My idea was to take it easy for a while until money ran short and I found a job that appealed to me.

"My wife and mother were anxious for me to settle down. And the way I came to settle down was like this: I took a job as fertilizer salesman for a sort of farmers' cooperative. Never had any experience in that line, but I found I could sell goods and collect the cash for it like nobody's business. One thing in my favor, my father had thirteen married sisters and half the folks in my end of the county were kin to me and glad to help me. The Perry's were always clannish.

"About the time I discovered that I had business ability, I was with a party of friends who had stopped at a roadside lunch room and auto accessory place on the outskirts of town to buy a bulb for a tail lamp. The rough neck who ran the place charged them [30?] cents

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for a 10 cent bulb and insulted them when they asked him to install it for them. They almost had a fight with him. I began to check up on that baby and it came to me as plain as daylight that some one could put a business alongside him and treat the public right, and make a 6 pile of money. The trouble with that bird was, he had such an advantageous location and business came to him so easy, that he thought he had things sewed up and could tell everybody to kiss his ass. When a fellow gets that way he's already done for.

"Now I didn't want to go into business especially, but there was my step-son just out of high school. He didn't want to go to college; wanted to go to work He was smart as a briar, level-headed, not afraid of work and rarin' to go. Here was a chance for him. I got an option on a good business site next door to the cock-sure cuss who thought he had the world by the tail; threw up a fairly decent store building with a good front; put in a soda fountain and lunch counter and stocked her with everything from hot dogs, cheese and coca cola to automobile springs, tires, gas and cylinder oil.

"We did so well that by 1928 I came into town and built a two storey brick building on a good business street and removed the business from the outskirts to the new downtown location. But I was already beginning to go to hell and didn't know it.

"Now, we're coming to how I got to be a J.P. In my business experience we did some credit business and every now and then we had to sue some fellow for his account, get out a claim and siezure or execute a judgment. All of the cases I took to Squire Bagley, who 7 was a right wise old fellow and who got most of the J.P. court cases in the county. In my talks with Squire Bagley and observing his methods, I thought I'd like to have his job. And then, Bless God, the old Squire dropped dead in 1929. I didn't want to be disrespectful to his memory, but his corpse wasn't cold before I was circulating a petition for my appointment as his successor. I got the appointment while a dozen other fellows who wanted it were getting ready to pull their wires. My policy always has been, if you want a thing, go after it, and no fooling.

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"First thing I did after getting my commission was to subscribe to a mail order law course. And it was a good one. I lost no time in mastering it.

"When the better class of lawyers and business men around town found that I took my office seriously and brought to it something of the judicial poise and dignity that it deserved, they kept me pretty busy with that raft of small civil litigation that is grist for the J.P. Courts. My addiction to liquor hadn't betrayed me then.

"But I got to drinking more heavily and my clients began to take their cases to other magistrates. It got so that about the only fees I could pick up were for marrying runaway couples from Virginia. I have averaged a marriage a day. A marriage usually turned me in a five dollar fee. I never left it to the groom to slip me what he pleased. I made my fee \$5.00 and got it — except in the case of an occasional nigger who didn't have \$5.00. But if that nigger wore spats he paid me five dollars flat. A lot of those Virginia niggers who come over the line to get married are dressed like a bed of zinnias, and wear spats.

"But my liquor got me down. I was one of those fellows who thought he could hold his liquor; it finally got the double scissors on me — and I don't mean maybe.

"I didn't come from a drinking family. My father always kept a jug of liquor in the house. It was his custom to take a swig out of the jug in the morning, put the jug back in the closet and not touch it again until next morning.

"He was the same way with tobacco. He'd light a cigar every Saturday around noon and smoke until Sunday night, and then forget about smoking until next Saturday.

"I always drank after I got out into the world, sometimes times for the fun of it, sometimes for the pure hell of it, but usually just to be sociable.

"But you can't play with the stuff regular without it getting you down. It had begun to get me in 1924; and then I got religions joined the church and laid off the stuff. I put my heart and

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soul into church work, and if you ever show any willingness to work in a church 9 they'll pile it on You. Before I knew anything they had me teaching a class, directing the choir, leading the B.Y.P.U, and ushering. I was the chief handshaker; meet 'em at the door and give 'em the glad hand.

"Hell! I had to get drunk to get out of so much work. I was never one to be burdened by responsibilities. Whenever I have found my responsibilities getting burdensome I walk out on 'em. That's why I'm a failure as a husband. It wasn't long after I took to drink again before they eased me out of my responsibilities.

"When I got this J. P. job it seemed to me that I had to fortify myself with a drink of two every time I had a marriage to perform. You see, I took my job seriously and I wanted to make a reputation. Performing a marriage ceremony made me nervous. If I could get a couple of drinks in me I'd get over my self-consciousness and get a grip on myself.

"When I got the idea liquor was helpful to me, there's where I let liquor step in and lick me. I stayed drunk for five years and four mouths before my sisters got hold of me and persuaded me to try to snap out of it.

"My best friends shunned me. My clients deserted me. I had little money coming in and most of that went for booze. I got shabbier and shabbier. About the only places I was tolerated were nip joints and pool rooms patronized my bums. I was a bum myself. My wife 10 had deserted me, went to Reno and got a divorce and went back to her people. Who the hell could blame her? For two years of it I was just a Curbstone J.P., if you know what that means. Couldn't pay office rent. Every dollar I made went for liquor.

"I had got so bad off that one Saturday evening, when I found the D.T's. coming on, I 'Phoned the police and asked them to come and lock me up. I stayed in jail Saturday night, Sunday and Sunday night. Monday morning my brother came to see me and asked me if I didn't want to go to Dix Hill and take the cure?

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"I said Hell, no! Just get me a decent suit of clothes so I can move among decent people again and hold my head up, and I can lick this thing. My family got me a new suit of clothes and I moved out of the slum lodgings into which I had drifted and got back on Main Street. Sure enough, my old self-respect came back to me and I didn't take a drink for 45 days. And then a friend came along and offered me a drink. I thought I would take one just to convince myself that I could handle it. I was going to take just one drink to show that I could take it and let it alone.

"But that one drink robbed me of all my will power and I took another and another until I was stewed to the gills. It wasn't long after that before I went to Dix Hill. I was in Dix Hill for 61 days. They straightened me out there.

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"The D. T's. are the most realistic things a man can have. You see snakes and monsters of all fantastic shapes; and when you see them you will run from them and all hell can't stop you. I had them come on me in the Elks' Club one night and I broke out of there like a wild man and ran for nearly three miles until I was so exhausted I flopped.

"But it isn't just snakes you see; usually it is your own best friends who are conspiring to harm you. They may be miles away from you, but you can hear their voices as plainly as if they were in this room.

"I remember one night I spent with poor old Bill McGhee — he's dead now —; Bill had D. T's. and his wife had sent for me. I laid with him on his bed with my arms locked around him to try to keep him quiet. But in one of his deliriums he saw the president of his company — the best friend he had on earth — pointing a double-barrel shotgun at him. He screamed, broke my grip and it took three other man and myself to subdue him again. That's what D. T's. do to you.

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"No, I haven't taken a drink now since I got back from Dix Hill, but once in a while I have had a strong desire for a drink and then's when I've had to watch myself; I know if I take another drink I'm gone. I realized some time ago that there was where I needed God; I'm not strong enough by myself to resist temptation, but I rely on God's help and God and David Perry can overcome any obstacle on earth.

"Did you ever want a drink of liquor more than anything 12 else on earth? Well, you don't know how to sympathize with a drunkard. Since I quit the stuff I have felt the desire coming on and it would almost overpower me. One afternoon, sitting in my office, the desire for a drink came on me all of a sudden. I felt that I could give my life for a tumbler full. The temptation was to sneak out to a liquor store, buy a pint of liquor, come back to my office, lock myself in and let myself go. In stead I came down to the street, entered a drug store, bought a soft drink of some kind, talked to somebody, to try to forget myself until I could get a grip on myself.

"The next time the desire came on me it wasn't so strong. A third time and I shook it off without any trouble. I haven't had any desire for the stuff since I got by that third temptation. You can't play with the stuff. I never saw a man who played with it any length of time that it didn't mess him up.

"You go along for years taking a few sociable drinks with the boys; and then you begin to lay in a supply for a week-end, a fishing trip or a convention frolic. Presently you find yourself wanting a drink and taking a drink to quiet your nerves. That's when it's got you, and if you don't put it away from you it will get you down. And there's no cure for it; you've got to cure yourself.

Two doctors told me that at Dix Hill. They told 13 me that my body and mind, both, were sick and that both needed rest. They told me that I was burdened with troubles, most of them brought on by liquor itself, and for me to drop my troubles; they said they'd look after

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them. We can't cure you, you will have to cure yourself; but our business is to help you and we are going to make it as pleasant for you as we know how. And they did.

“And I cooperated with them. You see, I wasn't forced into Dix Hill; I went there of my own free will and accord because I was sincere in wanting to be cured. No need to go to Dix Hill if you don't want to make a sincere effort to sober up and stay sober. No good forcing a fellow in there. Force a man into Dix Hill and he's resentful when he goes in and resentful when he comes out. Chances are he'll get drunk before he gets back home.

“I enjoyed my stay at Dix Hill. The doctors, nurses and attendants are fine; the environment delightful; the food good and the social life helpful and stimulating. You meet some fine fellows there, men from the best families in the state, men who rate high in their own communities.

“I found something else at Dix Hill; a lot of folks are making a racket of it. You take a tobacco farmer; he sells his crop in the late summer or early fall, gets a wad of money and proceeds to blow it in. Maybe he gets on a drunk and stays on it until he has made himself a nuisance to his family.

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His wife packs him off to Dix Hill and is rid of him for several months. Things are so quiet around the house and she enjoys so much freedom that she likes it. Next season, when his crop is off, she encourages him to get soused so that she can send him off to Dix Hill again until it's time to start the next crop.

“This J. P. job just suits me. I have lived enough, traveled enough, seen enough and thought enough about life to be tolerant and sympathetic. I'm not inclined to pre-judge people and I'm just that independent that I don't have to truckle to anybody who would try to use my court. I get a kick out of my work; you never know what's going to turn up next; and, for a close up of human nature in the raw, you can always get it in a J.P. Court.

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"I always look for something worth noting when I have a bunch of Negroes before me. You'll see a difference in the nature of niggers and white folks in a court trial. I'll cite you a case:

"A Negro woman who owned some property in one of the upcounty townships had a bunch of niggers arrested for trespassing on her land and stealing timber. I heard the evidence and rendered a verdict for the plaintiff, sentencing the defendants to 30 days in jail, each, judgment to be suspended upon payment of costs and good behavior for two years. The costs amounted to \$14.60. The defendants pleaded 15 that they didn't have a cent.

"All right,' I says to the constable, 'take 'em over to the county jail and maybe they can find the money.' The plaintiff came over to me and says: 'Mr. Jedge, I doan want these men to go to jail; they's got families to feed an' it would be hard on 'em; I'll pay their costs if you'll make 'em pay me back.'

"Well, sir, the woman paid the costs of the men she had prosecuted and the court room scene was turned into a love feast, plaintiff and defendants leaving the court room as happy as children.

"Now that sort of thing has happened in my court room as many as twenty times. But always among Negroes. I've never had a white prosecutor show any kindness to the person he was prosecuting. Whites come into court with blood in their eyes and go out the same way, often nursing their hostility for the rest of their lives. Negroes are not that way; they can forgive and forget; and when they think justice has been done they'll help the one that has offended them if it is within their means.

"I get the greatest kick out of marriage ceremonies. There are a lot of people who don't want a church wedding; many of them can't afford it. And then there's a touch of romance in running over the line to another state and getting the knot tied unbeknownst to the

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neighbors. I go to bed with the telephone at my bedside, because they call me at all hours of the night.

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"One night, after midnight, I got a call from the police headquarters that a couple was on their way to my place to get married. A motorcycle cop led the way for them.

"I dressed hurriedly, came downstairs, went out on the street and there in front of my place was a sporty automobile with a stoutish woman of 30 or 35 years at the wheel. A fat, bald-headed old boy was slumped over at her side, his head on her shoulder.

"Wake up, Honey!" she said to the bald-head, giving him a shake; 'We are going to get married.'

"Who? Me? yawned Baldy; 'Not me!' And the old boy meant it; he was drunk enough, but not too drunk to take care of himself.

"I remember another couple that called me out at 11:40 the night of a December the 13th. 'We want to get married on the 13th and we have only 20 minutes before midnight,' said the groom. I rushed him to the home of the Registrar of Deeds who always keeps blank marriage license forms in his home; he wrote out the license and I married 'em right there, pronouncing them man and wife at three minutes before midnight.

"The very next December 13th the same couple came in with another couple who wanted to be married on the 13th. 'How has your marriage on the 13th turned out?' I inquired of the first couple. 'Just swell,' they replied; 'We're still crazy about each other.'

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"And then there was the young fellow who applied for a marriage license and couldn't remember his bride's name. He had given his name, age, residence and place of birth to the Registrar. And then the Registrar asked him for the name of the young lady.

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"Danged if I know!" the young man exclaimed; 'I've courted her for six months and the only name I've known her by is Sis.' And then the ludicrousness of the thing flashed on him, his face assumed a sheepish grin and then he burst into paroxysms of laughter. It took him ten minutes to recompose himself and answer the Registrar's questions, after asking the bride for her full name.

"Came one night, a couple from Norfolk who wanted to be married. The bride, a beautiful brunette was accompanied by her sister, also a beauty. I thought I had never seen a more beautiful or more desirable pair of sisters - black hair, liquid black eyes, fine skins and figures like nobody's business.

"Now, I never kiss the bride. I don't believe in that sort of foolishness; but after the ceremony the groom and I took a drink and I went out to the car where his bride and her sister were waiting. I crawled in on the seat with the sister and said; 'I never kiss a bride, but I think I'd like to kiss this bride's sister,'

"Both girls giggled and the bride said: 'Rosa, why don't you kiss him?'

"By this time I had my arm around her, she yielded to me and we embraced in one of those old fashioned country kind kisses that popped my temperature up 50 degrees and sent electric currents through my spine and every vein of me. It was electrical. It left me limp as a rag and swimming in the head. I had gotten the girl's name and address and the next day I called her up by long distance. She wasn't home, but her mother answered the 'phone and I told the old lady that I had fallen heels over head in love with her daughter and was going to marry her. The old lady giggled. There followed a hot courtship of nearly two years before she met and fell in love with another man; and the thing broke off right then and there.

"But the most/ exciting thing that ever happened to me was just a few weeks ago. I married a Navy man and a very attractive young woman who had come down from Norfolk. I

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noticed the bride was staring at me all through the ceremony, like someone in a trance. After the ceremony I had lunch with them in a cafe around the corner. She continued to search me with her eyes. After the lunch was over she asked me if I would let her have my office key, said she wanted to arrange her toilet. I let her have the key. She was gone about 30 minutes. When she came back she pressed the key into my hand and it was wrapped in a piece of paper, which I immediately pocketed.

"After the couple departed I unwrapped the key. On the paper was written a request that I look in my Bible when I got back to my office.

"In my Bible I found two notes. 'Darling, I love you;

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I do not love the man I have just married and I am going immediately to Florida and get a divorce. I'm coming back and marry you.' That was the gist of both notes. Next morning I got a letter and a 'phone call from her and she said she knew what she wanted and she was going to marry me or shoot me. I never was in such a pickle in my life.

"I told Mrs. Perry, my divorced wife about it (I think she wants to come back to me); Mrs. Perry said: 'If there is going to be any shooting I am the one who is going to do the shooting!'

"Most couples who come to me to be married take the step in all seriousness. Some, I suspect, rush into marriage recklessly and impulsively and I married one couple who afterwards admitted that they married on a wager. She was an Earl Carroll's Vanities Beauty. After one wedding the bride turned to me and said:

"Now, Mr. Perry, you have married us; tell us/ now how to make a success of our marriage.' 'Young lady,' I said, 'You are on the right track right now; you are giving thought to the serious side of matrimony; the fact that you are taking thought is the best guarantee

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of making a go of it. Many marriages go on the rocks because they are taken too lightly. No business, no enterprise, no institution can survive without thought being given to it.

“This J.P. business brings a fellow face to face with some of life's tragic realities. Take the case of a socially prominent young couple from a Virginia city who came to me a few years ago. The girl was in the family way - four months 20 gone. They had tried to hide it until too late. They pleaded with me to marry them and date their marriage certificate back so they could face their relatives and friends and spare their child the shame of having been conceived out of wedlock.

“I told them I couldn't do anything like that; that I was a court officer and court records must not be misleading.

“And then, moved by the distress of the young woman and impressed by the character and sincerity of the couple, I said: 'But sometimes when I tear a marriage certificate off my pad a duplicate blank certificate adheres to it. There would be nothing in the world to prevent you from having same one forge a new certificate dated as you like.' 'And,' I added, 'no one would ever be prosecuted for forging my signature in such a case.'

“The groom wrung my hand and the young woman burst into tears of relief and gratitude.

“When they left, after I had performed the ceremony, I straightened out the crumpled five dollar bill the groom had placed in my hand, for my fee; inside it I found another crumpled five dollar bill. Which all goes to show that it pays for a man to have the courage to do what his heart tells him is morally right, even when it isn't always according to Hoyle.

“Mrs. Perry thinks she would like to try another marriage with me. We may get together again. I am 51 years old but I have put this body through the works for nearly two score 21 years and I am mentally - altho I hope not altogether physically - as old as Methusalah. Mrs. Perry is no spring chicken. Romance is just about out with both of us. When a man begins to age he feels the need of a home and a woman needs companionship. But I

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could never make any woman happy. Women expect a lot of a husband; nobody need ever expect of me that I will do any other than have my own good-natured, happy-go-lucky, don't-give-a-damn sort of way.

“What I'm thinking about now is security in my old age. I don't want to be dependent on anybody. I've seen a lot of ups and downs, but I never stooped to panhandling. My one redeeming virtue is an ingrained pride.

I've just incorporated a little business - something new in North Carolina - for which there is a long-felt need; I'm counting on it making life easy for me when I get it going.”